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Ch'an Tradition: History, Theory, Practice

*Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on October 21, 1992
at Washington University*

When we speak of Ch'an as it developed in China, we must recognize the difficulties in separating the specific concepts of Ch'an from those of Buddhism in general. It is in fact impossible for someone to achieve the highest attainment in Buddhism without some experience or practice equivalent to that available in the Ch'an tradition.

Buddhism emphasizes the recognition and attainment of wisdom. Without the reality of this attainment, Buddhism means nothing. But why do we cultivate wisdom? To resolve internal struggles and suffering, and to deal with the problems we encounter. The goal of Buddhism, therefore, is to attain wisdom through the guidance of Buddhist concepts and methods of practice similar to those found in the Ch'an tradition.

Buddhism was first brought to China at about the time of Jesus. In this early period dhyana contemplation was the method of practice used. This is a system that helps one to calm the mind and come to an understanding of self in order to bring about wisdom. The introduction of this method as a way to open a path to wisdom was important to the transmission of Buddhism to China.

You may have heard it said that Ch'an Buddhism resembles a religion, but is not truly a religion. Ch'an Buddhism is indeed a religion. Religions speak of faith, and the practice of Ch'an cannot be accomplished without faith. For a discussion of the importance of faith in Ch'an practice, please refer to my book *Faith in Mind*. However, the faith we speak of in the Ch'an tradition is different from the faith in other religions, which emphasize belief in supernormal beings or gods which are distinct from oneself. Ch'an stresses the importance of having faith in the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings show that everyone has Buddha-nature and that everyone can therefore attain Buddhahood. Every human being who truly has faith in the teachings of the Buddha and follows the principles and methods of practice can become a Buddha.

There are many stories in the Ch'an tradition about disciples asking their masters the question, "What did Bodhidharma bring from India to China?" The answers from all the masters appear to be different, but their essential point is the same: Bodhidharma didn't bring anything to China, just himself. He went to China to tell people that everyone has Buddha-nature and everyone can attain Buddhahood.

When the disciple in one such story asked why, the master replied, "Because it already existed in China." The disciple continued, "If it already existed in China, then why did he have to come?" The master answered, "If he did not come, people in China would not know that Buddha-nature exists in every sentient being." Bodhidharma went to China with nothing but himself to spread the message that everyone has Buddha-nature and that everyone should have faith in it. Before becoming enlightened, one must have faith that one has Buddha-nature.

The Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, probably contributed the most to the development of Ch'an. His most important teaching can be summarized in the phrase, "No abiding, no thought, no form." One must experience the state of mind to which these phrases refer to realize the Buddha-nature in oneself. Even though we speak of Buddha-nature, there is nothing concrete which we could point to as Buddha-nature. This is the essence of emptiness -- sunyata. When Bodhidharma went to China, he mentioned something called the Tathagatagarbha, a term which means that everyone has Buddha-nature.

In the Platform Sutra, the teaching of "No abiding, no thought, no form," was consistent with the essential teaching of the Diamond Sutra -- emptiness. We should not mistake Buddha-nature for something concrete or unchangeable, for then Ch'an would be indistinguishable from a formal religion which emphasizes faith in something external, monolithic and unchanging. This is not correct.

The fourth generation disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, Master Chao-chou, had a disciple ask him the following question: "If all sentient beings are supposed to have Buddha-nature, what about dogs?" The master answered, "No." On the surface, this answer seems to contradict what the Buddhaharma teaches. But we need to understand that Buddha-nature is not concrete or unchanging. This kind of dialogue, which seems paradoxical, contradictory or nonsensical became a method of practice called kung-an or hua-t'ou.

There are four key concepts in Ch'an: faith, understanding, practice and realization. Faith belongs to the realm of religion, understanding is philosophical, practice is belief put into action, and realization is enlightenment. All these put together create the door which one enters to attain wisdom. In general, without faith, it is difficult to understand; without understanding, you can't practice; and without practice, enlightenment is impossible.

Basically, one must have faith that all beings have Buddha-nature and understand that Buddha-nature is not something unchanging and substantial. When we begin practice and have not really accepted the existence of Buddha-nature, we must have faith in its existence. If we do not, we will not be receptive to the teachings or be able to put them to use. But once one has accepted the existence of Buddha-nature, it is important not to think of it as static or concrete. If we cling to the conception of Buddha-nature as essentially unchanging, we will think there is a true self

within us. We will embrace that self, whether it is a true or false self. We will be limited by and attached to that idea of self and will never attain liberation. First one must accept the existence of Buddha-nature, then abandon it completely because there is no such thing. In this way one can truly experience moving from existence to non-existence.

We know that Ch'an practice involves meditation, and that it can be an uncomfortable process, especially because of physical pain. This is why a few early Ch'an masters did not encourage sitting meditation. Even the old manuscripts and documents show no evidence of the Sixth Patriarch sitting in meditation either before or after his enlightenment.

The first two generations of masters after the Sixth Patriarch also de-emphasized the importance of meditation, as can be seen in the famous story about Ma-tsu and his master, Nan-yue. One day while Ma-tsu was sitting in meditation, Nan-yue used a very skillful method to point out its weakness. He asked Ma-tsu, "What are you doing?" Ma-tsu replied, "I am meditating." Nan-yue said, "Why?" To which Ma-tsu responded, "I do it to attain Buddhahood." Nan-yue said nothing but picked up a brick and started polishing it. Ma-tsu asked, "Why are you doing that?" Nan-yue said, "I am making a mirror." Ma-tsu thought about it and asked, "How is it possible for a brick to become a mirror?" Nan-yue replied, "If one cannot polish a brick to make it become a mirror, then how can you become a Buddha by meditating?" This dialogue is still a popular teaching, and it is one of my favorite hua-t'ou's as well. So it is not necessary to meditate to attain Buddhahood or enlightenment.

I have been teaching meditation for over a dozen years and I've come across quite a few very intelligent people who want to use the ancient way of practice used by the Sixth Patriarch and Nan-yue. They do not want to sit in meditation or do not want meditation to take too much time or cause pain. To these people I say that the ancient Ch'an masters are gone now. Modern Ch'an masters require meditation practice.

Prior to the Sixth Patriarch, the Third, Fourth and Fifth Patriarchs all emphasized the practice of meditation. Only the Sixth Patriarch and his followers didn't agree on this point. We do know from manuscript records that Ma-tsu's disciple, Pai-chang, had on-going meditation at his monastery. We may say that enlightenment does not come only from meditation, but meditating is nonetheless a necessary step toward liberation. The guidance of Ch'an concepts is also essential in conjunction with meditation practice. With the guidance of a good teacher, strong practice and Ch'an teachings, enlightenment is not far.

Only through the method of meditation can we calm the mind. Once that has been achieved, then we can reduce our subjective and selfish habits which cause so much vexation. When the mind is calmed to a tranquil or unified state, then it is possible to see what the self is.

There are essentially two major schools of Ch'an: Lin-chi, which uses the methods of kung-an and hua-t'ou, and Ts'ao-tung, which uses the method of silent illumination. Using the methods of either of these schools can lead to enlightenment, but regardless of which one a practitioner adopts, there is a similar preparation. First, one must be able to relax both body and mind and then bring oneself to a concentrated, unified state. Only at this point can the methods of kung-an and hua-t'ou or silent illumination be used. The process of meditation is long. It is not something

one can accomplish by reading a couple of phrases. It involves long, sustained, practice.

Three Weekend Seminars at the Ch'an Center

The Formation of Ch'an in China. Presented by Professor John R. McRae of Cornell University on May 13 and 14, 1994.

The introduction and conclusion of Professor McRae's book, *The Northern School and the formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, served as the text for this seminar. He presented an overview of early Ch'an and many historical details which challenged the simplistic ideas taught Ch'an students as Ch'an history. Professor McRae looked especially at *The Platform Sutra*, which tells the alleged story of the sixth Ch'an Patriarch, Hui-neng. He discussed the origin of the sutra and placed it in the context of its time as represented by other records. The earliest known version of the Platform Sutra is believed to have been written between 830 and 860, and the most common version is from later, so Professor McRae was very interested in records from the time when the events recorded were supposed to have happened, about 674.

(Please note in the following paragraph that Shen-hsui and Shen-hui, whose English transliterations are quite similar, were two different people)

The discrepancies between *The Platform Sutra* and other records of the time are striking. For instance, we are taught to think of the Northern School as Shen-hsui's discredited, gradualist school of Ch'an formed after the death of Heng-jen (d. 674) the undisputed fifth Patriarch of Ch'an. According to the sutra, Shen-hsui was the head monk in Heng-jen's monastery and the loser to Hui-neng in the famous enlightened verse contest described in the Sutra. The result of the contest was that Heng-jen chose Hui-neng, an illiterate southerner, as his successor and the Sixth Patriarch rather than Shen-hsui. However, Heng-jen did not announce his choice publicly and sent Hui-neng off to deepen his insight. According to records other than the Platform Sutra, Shen-hsui (d. 706) was the most important propagator of Heng-jen's teachings, and like Heng-jen called his school the East Mountain School, or the Southern School. The term Northern School and the description of its practices as gradual were in fact invented by Shen-hui (684-758) some two generations after Shen-hsui to discredit his followers. Shen-hui claimed that the real inheritor of the Ch'an Patriarchy was not Shen-hsui but his own teacher Hui-neng, and also claimed the name Southern School for his own lineage.

Shen-hui became famous between 730 and 732 for denouncing the "Northern School" of Shenhsui. He was an evangelist who emphasized innate Buddha nature, and he attracted large crowds to his talks. He expounded a view of sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation. He viewed enlightenment as the arising of the aspiration to achieve Buddhahood on behalf of all beings. Shen-hui, who died in 758, was recognized in 792 by the Emperor as the 7th Ch'an Patriarch. Although the Ch'an school still recognizes his teacher, Hui-neng, as the Sixth Patriarch, he is no longer considered the seventh patriarch. Rather strikingly, despite his importance in later times, all we know about Hui-neng from his own time is that he was a not very important teacher in the south. He died in 713.

Professor McRae talked extensively about the origin and importance of the idea of the Ch'an lineage, the belief in an unbroken line of enlightened teachers going back to the Buddha. The earliest extant record of a Ch'an lineage is Faju's epitaph (d. 689). Fa-ju's students called Heng-jen the 5th Patriarch, as he is still considered. But they called Fa-ju the 6th Patriarch, not Hui-neng or Shen-hsui, and included a list of earlier Patriarchs different from those now recognized in the Ch'an tradition. Why did the idea of lineage eventually become so important to the Ch'an school? Professor McRae concluded that due to the great diversity of practices and beliefs among the many groups that considered themselves Ch'an, their only common characteristic was a belief in some version of the Ch'an lineage.

Professor McRae also talked about the methods of practice and doctrines of other early schools of Chinese Buddhism, as well as the social and political history of the time. He was extremely skillful at engaging an audience with different amounts of knowledge of his subject matter and different interests.

The History of Ch 'an Monasticism and Its Practices, Presented by Professor T Griffith Foulk of the University of Michigan on May 20 and 21, 1994.

Professor Foulk's interests lie in the institutional history of Ch'an and Zen. He examines records of monastery layouts, staff, liturgies, and other pertinent data. These accounts give a very different impression of life in Ch'an monasteries than what might be inferred from the Ch'an lamp histories and stories of the masters, which have demonstrably mythic components. Professor Foulk believes that the lamp histories were intended in part to establish the orthodoxy of the Ch'an school by establishing a genealogy or lineage linked directly to Buddha. Since Ch'an, unlike other schools of Buddhism, based itself on the attainment of individual masters and not on a particular sutra, "transmission" through an unbroken lineage was particularly important.

Professor Foulk listed six characteristics which are generally associated with the early Ch'an schools (sixth to early eighth century) including meditation, iconoclasm, sudden enlightenment, insistence on personal experience of enlightenment, pedagogical techniques and independent monastic institutions with special characteristics. He showed that each such characteristic was not exclusive to, invented by or sometimes even characteristic of early Ch'an. For instance, we generally think of Ch'an as the school for which meditation was most important. However, it was T'ien-t'ai that most emphasized meditation, and it was this school's meditation texts that were studied by Ch'an students. Monks of the early Ch'an school lived in a variety of circumstances and emphasized a variety of practices and scriptures, but they held a common belief in Ch'an genealogy.

Dr. Foulk believes that many characteristics of Ch'an did become fairly constant during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279), when the Ch'an school tried to gain control of the abbacies of the state-supported monasteries. Legitimacy was sought to be established by linking new abbots to the old lineage and projecting back the characteristics of Sung Dynasty Ch'an onto early Ch'an. The Ch'an school eventually gained the right to the abbacies of a majority of the state supported monasteries in China during the Sung Dynasty and thus became the major state-funded form of Buddhism.

Professor Foulk talked about Zen in Japan both as a scholar and as a practitioner in Soto and Rinzai monasteries. He still maintains friendships with a number of Zen priests in Japan. Professor Foulk pointed out that many of our ideas about Ch'an come from modern Japan rather than ancient China.

For instance, in China an ordained Buddhist monk or nun was free to study with any sect, perhaps eventually specializing in Ch'an. In Japan, by contrast, different Buddhist sects do not recognize each other's ordinations. In fact in the Rinzai school, monks are expected to stay with one teacher for life. This is quite different from the tradition in China and Korea.

Professor Foulk discussed why Ch'an arrived in Japan as late as the twelfth century, compared to its seventh-century entry into Korea. He said that before then Ch'an was kept out of Japan. Then the Kamakura warlords conquered Japan and sought an alternative to the influence of the existing Shingon and Tendai Buddhist temples, which had effectively become warlords with their own armies. They welcomed Ch'an as a nonviolent form of Buddhism which would help them to unify and control Japan. Ch'an stressed monastic rules including those prohibiting weapons and dedicated many services to the long life of the state.

Professor Foulk's chart of "The Zen Institution in Modern Japan"^[1] was particularly interesting. Included was a list of 22 denominations, and the related numbers of temples, monasteries, clergy and adherents. In 1984 the Soto School had almost seven million adherents, 26 monasteries and five nunneries. The Rinzai School was divided into 15 separate denominations, with 2 million adherents, 19 monasteries and one nunnery. Yasutani Roshi's Sanbo Kyodan school, which seems so important in the west, was one of a number of small reform sects with only about three thousand adherents. Professor Foulk gave a lesson in the significance of institutional history, his specialty, when someone asked how many Soto priests receive Dharma transmission. Professor Foulk showed that in 1984 there were almost 15,000 Soto temples and slightly more than 15,000 Soto priests. Every temple must have an abbot and all abbots must receive Dharma transmission. So almost every Soto priest who completed the six-month to five-year monastery training program received Dharma transmission.

Monastic Practice in the Korean Zen Tradition, Presented by Professor Robert F. Buswell Jr. of UC.L.A on June 10 and 11.

Professor Buswell spent seven years in Asia as a Buddhist monk, including five years in Songgwang Sa, a Son (Ch'an) monastery in Korea. He has translated the writings of the Korean Master Chinul and recently published *The Zen Monastic Experience*.

Professor Buswell spoke on the history of Korean Buddhism and especially Son. Son developed almost simultaneously with Ch'an in China and there was mutual influence. Korean monks studied in China, received transmission and returned to Korea to teach. Some Korean monks stayed in China and became influential enough to be recorded in the histories of eminent monks. The monk Pomnang is said to have gone to China, studied with the 4th Ch'an Patriarch and returned to Korea about 666. Professor Buswell believes that the second oldest Ch'an text, the Adamantine Absorption Sutra (Vajrasamadhi Sutra) was actually an apocryphal Sutra written in Korea by Pomnang to explain Ch'an to an unreceptive audience.

Like Professors McRae and Foulk, Professor Buswell is concerned with how Ch'an monks actually lived in the past and live today, as opposed to how their lives are represented in Ch'an literature. He believes that we will understand the ideals and beliefs of Ch'an better if we understand the context in which they developed. The way monks lived in the past and live now shows how Ch'an beliefs are expressed in life. For instance, despite Ch'an's insistence that it is not "dependent on words and letters," it has produced a very large body of literature. Modern Zen and Son monks in Japan and Korea study extensively before they are allowed to enter the meditation hall. In Korea they can usually read and chant in classical Chinese. Contemporary Zen and Son monks are quite involved with "words and letters" but the ideal expressed in "not dependent on words and letters" reminds them that this is not the last word of Ch'an.

Zen ideology emphasizes meditation, but in Japan the sangha consists mostly of priests who do little or no meditation. In Korea only 15% - 25% of monks concentrate on meditation. The rest are support monks who conduct services and run the monasteries. Although the intense practice of meditation is still the ideal, the majority of monks view a disciplined life with little defilement as the key to practice. Discipline allows the practitioner to control his or her desires and mind, and is the basis for concentration, meditation, samadhi and enlightenment. Although the meditation monks strive for the transformation that stems from seeing the true nature of the self, Professor Buswell contends that the emphasis westerners place on transformation comes from the religious ideas of William James as expressed by D. I. Suzuki. Most Asian monks emphasize simply staying on the path.

Professor Buswell described the development of the hua-tou in China, its introduction into Korea, and its use today. He detailed how his teacher worked with western students, his own experiences, and the information he has collected from experienced Son meditation monks.

The Ch'an Center is very grateful to all three professors for the time and energy they spent sharing their knowledge of Ch'an with us.

[1] Zen: Tradition and Transition, Kenneth Kraft, ed. (N.Y: Grove Press, 1988).

